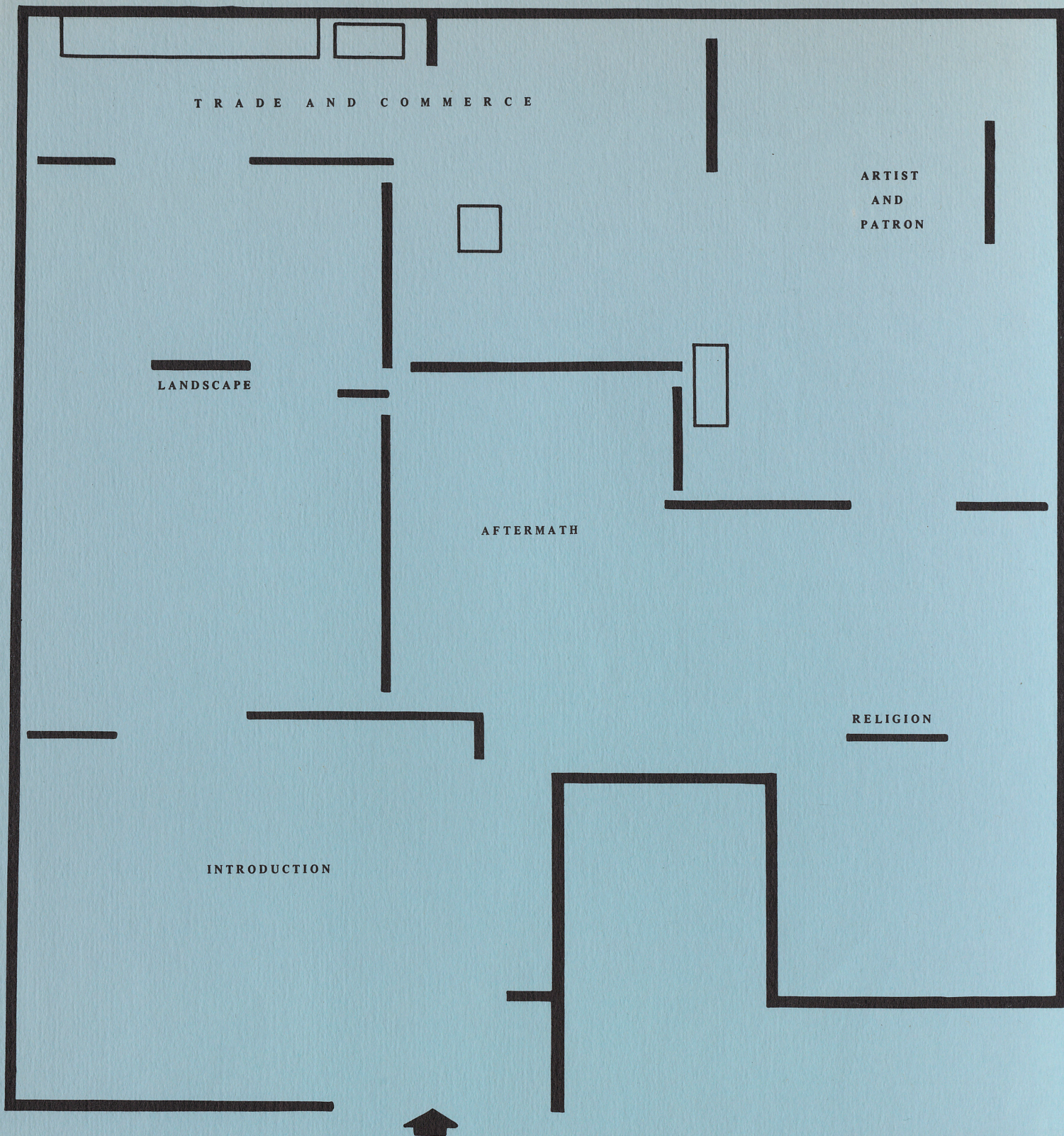






Cleveland Museum of Art

Dutch Art and Life in the Seventeenth Century

Cover. *Port of Amsterdam*. Etching. Ludolf Backhuysen, Dutch, 1631-1708.
Dudley P. Allen Fund. (CMA 24.857)

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This exhibition is an experiment for The Cleveland Museum of Art. It uses works of art in two ways: one is the traditional way works of art are used, as objects to look at and take pleasure in; the other is as documents of history, to illustrate, explain, and recall the spirit of another time and place.

The time is the seventeenth century, the place Holland. Or, the North Netherlands, to be historically accurate. The northern provinces of the Low Countries won their independence from Spanish rule through intense military and political struggles during the last half of the sixteenth century; the South Netherlands did not win their independence until more than a century later.

Maps, photographs, and portraits of sixteenth century political leaders open the exhibit, as if to set the scene of history; they are accompanied by paintings that survey the artistic currents of the time. As political unity gradually developed, so did a recognizable style that distinguished northern Netherlandish—that is, Dutch—art from that of the southern Netherlands, or Flanders, and from the art of the rest of northern Europe.

Landscape was a subject dear to seventeenth-century Dutch painters. The second section is devoted to landscape paintings arranged to reveal their changing styles. Take one example of an art historian's interest in style: how a painter handles space and distance. The earlier northern tradition used a kind of shorthand—horizontal bands of color—to separate near space from receding distant space. The later Dutch painters developed from this to overall color schemes and atmospheric perspective, for an illusion of more realistic space and distance.

These newly-unified northern provinces, which custom called Holland after the single largest province, enjoyed an unprecedented economic prosperity. Small as it was, Holland became the center of a network of far-flung trading posts; its ships traveled every ocean, its merchants entered every market. The influence of this international activity shows up often in Dutch art. The influence, of course, worked both ways: in terms of style and technique, the Dutch affected the Japanese, for example, almost as much as they were affected by them. A few Japanese objects provide an interesting sidelight to the way history operates.

As the North Netherlands can reasonably be considered the first modern urban capitalistic society, and certainly the first successful one, its social patterns are of interest to citizens of a later urban capitalist society. To an art museum, the position of artists within the society, their patrons and commissions, are subjects of special interest. The next section of the exhibit focuses on representations of artists, their studios, and their patrons. Art collecting in seventeenth-century Holland—Dutch burghers eagerly collecting foreign art and foreign patrons as eagerly searching out Dutch art—may not be unfamiliar to American artists, or patrons, in the twentieth century.

One aspect of life in seventeenth-century Holland is more difficult for us to understand. By modern standards, Dutch religious life was restrictive, forbidding open worship to certain groups; yet its limited toleration of religious diversity was a marked contrast to the rest of Europe three hundred years ago when religious freedom was unknown. Calvinist Protestantism was the established sect, an unusual situation in a Europe long dominated by the Roman Catholic Church. Catholic churches in Holland were stripped bare of their icons and used as houses of Protestant worship; these buildings fascinated some Dutch painters. Theologians, philosophers, and religious events of the Hebrew Bible and of the New Testament figure significantly in the paintings, drawings and prints of the period, while the martyrs and saints of southern European painting are notably absent.

As Protestantism, urban life, and capitalism spread, and as Europe grew farther away from the old images of man and society, seventeenth-century Dutch art exerted persistent influences on European art. The influences, especially in England and France—and particularly in landscape and portraiture, two categories emphasized in the exhibit—are demonstrated in the final section.

No catalog was made for this show. Instead, there are numerous informative labels. The Museum hopes that the exhibit, with its unusual mix of long labels, historical data, and original works of art, succeeds in its intention of placing works of art within their social and political context—and that in so doing the exhibit revives, for its brief time, the modern spirit of the art and life of the northern Netherlands in the seventeenth century.

